

# Traditional knowledge, language, and the men's house: the case of an Oceanic language in Papua New Guinea

Hiroko Sato (University of Hawaii)

Luku Mara (Nutanovua village)



# Co-presenter



- Former head of the primary school in Nutanovua village (until 2010)
- My main consultant since 2010
- My host-uncle (my host father's brother-in-law)

# Background of collaboration

- Himmelmann elaborates on how researchers' data collecting activities require “[c]lose cooperation with and direct involvement of the speech community” (2006:15–16)
- Grenoble emphasizes that linguists must “engage in collaborative work with the communities of native speakers whose languages they document” (2010:295)
- some successful case studies (Yamada (2007), Dobrin (2008), and Penfield et al. (2008), among others)
- When collaboration is not an option: fieldwork in Kove, Papua New Guinea (Sato: ICLDC 1 2009)
  - Community's indifferent attitudes toward their language as well as my linguistic work



# Purpose and outline

- What are the community's needs and how does community-based documentation respond to these needs and values?
- How can we raise awareness of the importance of their language?
- Background as a researcher in the Kove area
- Background as a language consultant
- Kove culture and the community's attitudes
- Implication for fieldwork and linguistic work







# New Britain



35 miles from east to west

18 villages (most of them are islands)

Austronesian language

About 8,000 people living in the Kove area, but many of them don't speak the Kove language





# Background as a researcher

- From 2001 to 2011 (2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2011; about 16 months)
- Family in Kimbe town (my father is from Kove)
- First village: Kapo village
  - My father's sister (main consultant)
- Changing villages in 2010
  - Safety issues
  - Loss of my father's sister (main consultant)
- Starting to work with Luku Mara (my father's brother-in-law) in Nutanovua village among other consultants



# Some issues of non-Kove people

- “[T]he Kove (or Kombe) have the reputation of being the most difficult people in the large island of New Britain, and they rejoice in it” (Chowning 1972:3)
- “[T]hey take pride in cheating and bullying the members of neighboring linguistic groups and in resisting the efforts of missionaries and the Australian government to alter their way of life” (Chowning 1972:3)
- Issues during my work until 2010
  - Indifferent or negative language attitudes
  - Negative feelings about working on their language
  - Unaware of the importance of their language
  - Indifference about preserving their language
- However, great consultants; and good relationship with the community.

# Background as a consultant

- He is married to my father's sister
- We have known each other since 2001
- How did he become a consultant?
  - *My father asked him to help with my research just before my 2010 trip*
  - *He couldn't say NO in his culture: an in-law is very important and respected*
  - *Once he said YES, he made a commitment*
- How did he feel at the beginning? Did he have any anxiety?
  - *What is my project? What do I eat? What are my daily living habits? etc...*
  - *One week later, he became more comfortable knowing I was relaxed.*



# Linguistic and cultural documentation

- Linguistic work, particularly focusing on Morpho-syntax
- Cultural documentation including material culture and the performing and visual arts
  - Rich traditional culture
    - Men's houses
    - Spirit masks
    - Shell money

# Central institution: Men's house



- 4-6 men's houses in each village
- Each family belongs to a particular men's house: family > relatives > men's house > village >
- Women cannot go inside a men's house; it is even inappropriate for men to go into another men's house
- Any decision is made in a men's house.
- Each men's house has its own symbol, own clan story and own spirit mask



# Central institution: Men's house and ceremonies



- Kove ceremonies: “an endless round of wealth exchanges” (Chowning 1972:4)
- Many occasions: bride price, initiation ceremony, funeral, end of a mourning period etc...
- Ceremonies are organized by a men's house
- 3-5 types of performances
- Ceremonies can last for weeks or months.
- Climax: from midnight to sunrise of the last few days

# Central institution: Men's house and spirit mask



- Highly respected
- Sacred masks
- Special songs for spirit masks



















## Some features

- These performances did NOT originate in Kove
  - Songs in another language, which Kove people don't understand at all.
  - Spirit masks also did not originate in Kove.
- Neighboring areas have already lost the structures of men's houses as well as similar ceremonies.

## Significance

- Kove culture
  - Kove identity (particularly the spirit mask of their men's house)
  - Important events (e.g. no school or no fieldwork when a ceremony is active.)
  - Young people are involved in ceremonies, and they are very excited to see spirit masks.
- very positive attitudes



# Fieldwork experience in cultural documentation

- As a researcher
  - Very unique culture
  - Not only recording ceremonies, but also being involved in performance as a dancer
- As a consultant
  - My enthusiasm in performing stimulates him to reflect on their culture
  - My concerns with the language situation led him to think about their cultural situation











# Change of Attitude

Beginning:

- *He was in a situation where he couldn't refuse working with me*
- *He did not have any idea about linguistics*

Toward the end:

- *He became aware of the importance of their culture*
- *Awareness of losing their culture gradually*

Linguistic work:

- *It was fun, and he also learned the Kove language from different perspectives, although he sometimes got bored with the same questions.*



# Implications for fieldwork

- Never give up
  - Changing situation
  - Changing aims
  - Great consultants
  - Long-term relationship
- My involvement may encourage them to reflect over their interests and needs
- Their positive attitude is a indicator of their needs and values

# Implications for language documentation

- The community is still indifferent toward their language, but people are gradually becoming aware of the language situation
- Linguistic work may not be the first choice, but if we find where their interest lies, it may be key to bridging collaborative work and linguistic research

→ Uncle Luku said

*-He wanted to keep up their traditional knowledge and make sure to pass it on to the next generation*

*-He would organize a lesson about traditional singing and dancing*



# References

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